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SOMERSET WILDLIFE TRUST

OTTER GROUP

NEWSLOTTER NO 5

DEC98

AUTUMN MEETING

Our autumn meeting in the Victory Inn was followed by a talk, and a buffet supper. We were pleased to welcome guests from other conservation organisations with whom we work closely, including SERC, RSPB, FWAG, the Environment Agency, the Mammal Society, SWT HQ, and Devon WT.

The main business of the meeting was the election of Saranne Cessford as the new Secretary, to take over from Cle Boyd in February. Cle has looked after the Somerset Otter group since its inception, and its considerable present strength is due to her wonderful way with people, drawing everybody into the fold.

Dr Paul Chanin and Karen Coxon gave a fascinating explanation of the sorts of information that are starting to emerge from the DNA survey we have been helping with. Of particular interest were the comparative maps of the results from the Brue and the Tone, on display on our smart new boards. A big thank you to Sally Mills for them.

Six new active members should enable us to continue our regular surveying work across most of the county, although there are still a few gaps. The DNA work identifies individuals; the regular monthly surveys and our annual 2Day Event check on the range of the population. With the habitat improvements put in by the EA, on advice from us, our otters get a very good service indeed.

Future plans include monitoring the M5 bridge works over the Tone to assess the disturbance, or lack of it, to the otters from all the engineering activity. Russell Gomm has set up a team for this. We are also hoping to get a statistician to analyse all our survey data so far, to identify any trends that may be implicit in all the valuable detailed records you have collected, and to check that we are presenting our findings in the most valuable way.

The next meeting will be on 8th February, at the Victory Inn, Norton Fitzwarren. Mary-Rose Lane, from the Devon WT, will talk on the Lifestyle of the Otter.

DEAD OTTERS.

Several members have been involved in getting corpses to the Environment Agency for analysis. You will all be interested to learn that the report has just been published, covering 77 otters from 1988 to 1996. Cars killed most, followed by bites from other otters. Most casualties happened when the rivers were bank high (like tonight), and more dogs than bitches were found. There is some very interesting information about pollutants, and their trends.

It is important to keep the corpses coming in. That way they are not a total waste. DO NOT FREEZE THEM. If you get a ripe one you may have to, but the best thing is to chill it, and ring the Environment Agency (Bridgwater), and/or me (James Williams). Urgent transport to the labs in Truro will be speedily arranged. A full veterinary autopsy will be done and of course a DNA sample will be taken in those areas where it is relevant.

Occasionally one hears of a hurt otter being taken to a vet. This presents a wonderful chance for some tests which cannot be done on a dead animal, to check for diseases, and of course to include it in the DNA survey. Basically beside the vital statistics of sex, weight and place of release, what is required is some hair clippings in a sterile bag, and 5 ml of blood taken with an "in serum syringe". This should be left to stand for half an hour, then the blood and the hair should be sent by post to Mr. Vic Simpson, Veterinary Investigations Centre, The otter should also be scanned for a micro-chip, as unfortunately the RSPCA has released some orphan otters not very far over the Devon border.

One such injured otter was found on Dunster Marshes recently and taken to the vets, where sadly it died. The local paper said it had been attacked by dogs. Personally I doubt that; I do not think any ordinary domestic dog would be able to hold a strong adult otter long enough to inflict the sort of injuries from which it would die. After the first nip, the otter would retaliate so vigorously that it would gain a chance to get into the water, and escape. Sadly, it seems that the more likely cause of these injuries was fighting with another otter.

R&D technical report W148 A Post Mortem Study of Otters is available from the Environment Agency.

HEALTHY RIVERS

There is more to having a healthy river than the colour and fragrance of the water. Obviously a smelly sewer will not have much life in it to support any otters, or anything else, but an apparently clean, clear river may also not be in the best of health, and have a low amount of faunal life in it. The number of animals it can support depends on the amount of food it produces.

Recently there have been some interesting developments about improving this aspect of the environment in our rivers. The obvious nasties, especially the new sheep dips, are being closely monitored. The old type of dip, the organo-phosphates, were very bad for the health of farmers. Belatedly they were replaced by the much more user-friendly synthetic pyrethroids; these are far stronger, and clean the sheep wonderfully. But they are very persistent, and even small amounts in a watercourse wipe out all the invertebrates for a considerable distance. By small amounts I mean as much as might drip off a wet sheep. Larger quantities, from careless emptying of the dip, or from a defective drain, can eliminate the food chain for fish for miles. There is no cure for such a lethal leakage; prevention is the only hope. Be alert for fish kills in an apparently pure river, especially if crayfish are killed; being virtually insects, they are particularly susceptible.

There is considerable concern about the crayfish themselves, of course, after the American Signal Crayfish brought in an infection and eliminated the locals. But as otter enthusiasts it does not matter to us which breed of crayfish is available to our otters; they both taste nice, as I can vouch.

Another recently arrived disease is a form of *Phytophthora* which is killing the riverside alders. It is already established on the Axe and the Tone. The trees start to die back and show tarry weeping sores on the main trunk at about eye-level. The final result is a bank lined with unsightly dead poles. There is no point in cutting out the moribund trunks, as this fungus attacks the roots, so unlike diseased elms they won't sprout again.

Again this is not something which should upset the otter purist unduly. The avenues of dense Alders which line the Tone in so many places have been shading out all the light, and by preventing water plants have been eliminating the basis of all food chains, photosynthesis, and reducing very considerably the amount of life produced in the water. In fact there is now a major scheme to improve the management of the river corridor, which includes pollarding and thinning as one of its methods of increasing the health of the river. So perhaps the demise of the serried ranks of alders will assist this work. But a complete lack of trees means a lack of shade, which increases the water temperature too much, and reduces the oxygen.

The scheme is being run by a partnership of SWT and EA, with assistance from the Taunton Flyfishing Club. The aim is to have a protective belt of natural vegetation along as much of the river as possible.

This will let the light in, and keep two sorts of harmful substance out. You don't have cow dips as equivalents of sheep dips, but the systemic parasite removers that are applied to cows can be just as harmful at times. In hot weather cows like to stand right in the water, which means they apply their manure directly. The trouble is, it contains insect killer. They also beat down the banks, causing silt and reducing the depth and speed of the river. And silt is the other harmful substance which the improvement schemes want to eliminate; it smothers anything which tries to live in the gaps between the stones, fish eggs included. Nor is it always very pure: it can bring with it a lot of crop chemicals, or, in areas with open cast pig farming, a lot of very potent organic matter as well.

With a good belt of plant life along the river bank, most of this will be used up in promoting the plant growth.

So things are looking up for the future management of our water ways. Meanwhile, if you suspect something nasty in the watershed, freephone 0800 80 70 60 for a rapid response.

HAPPY EVENTS

Congratulations to Lyn Jenkins, Regional Conservation Officer of the EA, and to Lyn White, of English Nature, on the birth of their first children.

The otters they both do so much for have done quite well, too. There has been evidence of breeding on the Isle, Parrett, Yeo, Culm, Bathern and Tone, where there were several different litters of cubs, we think. Hopefully the continuation of the DNA research will confirm some of these.

But nobody has reported any cub activity from the Levels. Perhaps this was to be expected, with such a shortage of bitches, and definite cubs last year(1997).

SADNESSES

We ought not to be complacent that Somerset has had far fewer reported otter deaths than Devon this year. The DNA research has already found one which crossed from the Exe to the Tone, and our most recent casualty seemed to be making her way across the low watershed from the Tone towards the Exe. I have noted 10 deaths in Devon, 9 of them from the Exe. I hope they have all been checked for DNA, in case they have been Tone visitors.

In Somerset, in 1998 we lost single otters from the Parrett, the Tone, the Williton and the Haddeo. There was another one from somewhere in the Bridgwater area, but I do not have precise details yet. Five is our lowest total of deaths for many years, but of course we are approaching the danger time, when the rivers are frequently in flood. Last year we had a dry February, and a moderate March, so may have been let off lightly.

MIGRANT WORKERS

SERC has moved. The new address is

Sandhill Park,

They get all your otter records, of course, but like to be told about other things as well. We ought to keep an especial eye out for Grass Snakes, Water Voles, Water Shrews, Crayfish, and Mink, among other things, and pass on our records to SERC. There is a Ph D student from Oxford working in our area on the interaction, if any, between Otters and Mink. Mink are obviously much reduced in numbers from say ten years ago. Why? Nobody knows. Lets hope it is nothing catching, and that they cannot pass it on to our otters.

MINOR MYSTERIES

Some of my local otters seem to have been making sand castles and not putting anything aromatic on them, which seems a bit pointless. Has anyone else noticed this? What is going on? It cannot just be the influence of the Turner Prize and the vogue for meaningless art shapes.

Information about this please, and about any outbreaks of mass sprainting. There is one place on the Tone where they seem to go berserk every winter; in December I had 37 recent spraints in one field, and in other years many more in the same field, in uncountable heaps. Could this also be something to do with the Turner Prize? If not, what is it? Any ideas?

HOLIDAY OTTERS

Steve Powell has sent in details of two ottery courses he has enjoyed.

The Field Studies Council runs a 3-day course near Shrewsbury in August. Cle went on one of these, too, and saw an otter. It takes a real expert! Apply for details to Preston Montford Field Centre,

The second one must be really good, as Steve has been three times. He writes:
"Secondly is a holiday in NorthWest Scotland, on the Rahoy estate, approximately a 10 hour drive from Ilminster. It is the estate where Bridget and Don MacCaskill are based and where their book "On the Swirl of the Tide" was written. I have made three visits to Rahoy, and on each occasion have seen otters during the day. There were also a pair of Red-throated divers, Mergansers, Eiders and numerous other species of birds on the loch, together with Grey and Common Seals. If you are lucky enough you may catch a glimpse of Pine Marten and Wildcat. I have a short video of the estate if anybody is interested."

THE DNA SURVEY: UPDATE

Karen says that the report on the first pilot year of this innovative study is nearly ready for publication. She will show her maps again at the meeting. But if anybody would like a photocopy of the relevant write-up of the Brue and/or Tone findings she would be happy to send you those parts of the report.

The current situation is that the finances needed to carry forward the pilot study for another three years, and to examine the populations in fuller detail, are being negotiated at present (Jan 99). Meanwhile our volunteers are keeping the pot boiling with a limited number of monthly spraint samples so that there is no gap in the records for the catchments under survey.

The lab work is now being done at Exeter, which is obviously a lot more convenient than Aberdeen. Because this is an interregnum between the pilot and the continuation, the samples have not been fully developed recently, so there is no new news of our otters. Hopefully there soon will be a cascade of findings when all the six months worth of spraints are interpreted. More details from Karen at **the meeting on 8th February**.